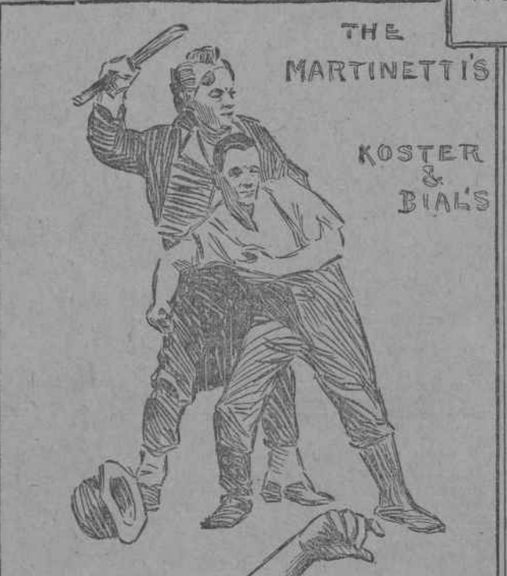

AMONG THE MUMMERS

BY ALAN DALE

Please consider that I'm crowing loudly. I can't think of the precise onomatopoetic word that indicates the sound of lusty birdy exultation. Perhaps, however, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" will answer the purpose. In that case allow me to remark, simply but emphatically, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

I can't help it. Human nature is human nature, and it is a duty I owe to my readers, as well as to myself, to exclaim "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" Five weeks ago, at the Lyceum Theatre in this city, a new play by Arthur W. Pinero called "The Benefit of the Doubt" was presented. It proved to be a singularly trashy and illogical work, quite unworthy of the delightful author of "The Amazons." Moreover, it was wretchedly acted by the Lyceum company, and the first night audience tittered at it. I told you the exact truth about it at the time, and added that even Pinero's admirable dialogue could not possibly help it. My confreres, however, gushed over it in the most ludicrously enthusiastic manner. It was a masterpiece, they said. It was absolutely brilliant. Every New Yorker with an ounce of artistic appreciation in his waistcoat pocket would revel in this new Pinero play—a play that attempted to gain your sympathy for a silly idot of a woman who, after informing her husband that she would devote the rest of her life to making him happy, rushed off to her lover, drank champagne with him and was swamped in her own boozy utterances. The play was not only absurd but disgusting.

My criticism caused unlimited indignation. I was misleading the public; I was dyspeptic; I was obstinately self-opinionated; I was minus a soul; et patati, et patata. Mr. Daniel Frohman, I am told, lashed himself into a fury at my words, more particularly because he hadn't been particularly sure about the play himself. No sooner, however, had the majority of the critics lavished their honeyed words upon it then Mr. Frohman forgot his little preliminary qualms and posed as the mighty gentleman of infallible judgment. I was the heavy villain, actuated by that strange malice always attributed to dramatic critics when they venture to tell the unpleasant truth.

Saccharine words, however, have never yet caused a bad play to succeed, any more than disagreeable words have spoiled the fate of a good play. The public knows what it wants, and woe to those who practise deception. I drew in my horns, and burrowed in my shell, perfectly convinced that "The Benefit of the Doubt" could not possibly enjoy a long run. Eight or ten laudatory "notices" will help a play, but they will not make it. They will moreover breed a resentful public, highly indignant at having been gulled.

In a word, this brilliant Pinero play, this masterpiece, this charming revelation, produced January 5, was withdrawn last night, after a five weeks' run! Five skinny, six-day weeks for what my confreres considered the play of the season, and the withdrawal in favor of an experimental revival of "The Prisoner of Zenda!" Who was right, and who was wrong? Own up, now, please. In addition to these facts, let me state that "The Benefit of the Doubt" was a failure in London, where they love Pinero far more than Americans love him, that alone is a fact pregnant with significance. You see, you can't fool the public. Box office criticisms may make very excellent reading, but the general public soon get "on to them," as the saying is.

The trouble with "The Benefit of the Doubt" was that it was built upon the quicksands of absurdity and improbability. As a farce, or a farce-comedy, it might have succeeded. If the exquisitely sensible heroine when in her cups had sang "We are a merry family; we are, we are, we are," with a pretty dance, nobody would have rebelled. As a serious Pinero play "The Benefit of the Doubt" hadn't a leg to stand upon.

And that is why I say to you crowingly, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

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As a production, "The Lady Slavey," at the Casino, is a highly creditable affair. It deserves to succeed, and I believe that it will. It is not merely a leggy affair designed to please gentlemen who have no hair to comb. The women will like the artistic costumes, the comely, arch damsels—the Dawn Griffiths and the Genie Unisses—and the specialties will appeal to everybody. This production recalls the Casino in its palmy days, before injunctions, and lawsuits, and legal quarrels had broken up a happy home. It will do a great deal to restore lost prestige, and to right the wrongs of this much-abused playhouse.

As an "operatic comedy," of course "The Lady Slavey" is absurd. It is nothing more than an entertainment, and I can't imagine why it should want to be anything more. There are thousands of people in this city who prefer an entertainment to any other form of theatrical offering. It makes demands upon the mental apparatus. You can sit in your seat sedately, and wait till the specialties roll by, Maggie. You can go in to the theatre at any time without losing a thread of plot, and you needn't criticise anything at all. You can go home and say, "It's a jolly good show, and I like it," without having to give any reasons for your opinion. That, in itself, is a boon—a priceless boon, It is the shows that you are afraid to like because you know that somebody with grayer matter in his cerebellum than you possess have ventured to disapprove that cause annoyance.

Miss Marie Dressler is so admirable that she is entitled to star. Don't blame me for putting the idea in her head, because I feel convinced that it is already there. Miss Dressler is fat and jolly. Feminine stars are running to fat nowadays. Your ethereal comediennes, abdominally depressed, and bonily dainty, have gone out of fashion. It is May Irwin, the queen of jocundity, who has taught us that it is possible for a star to be fat without being infamous. For years the lady who is "fond of her dinner and doesn't get thinner" has been held up to ridicule. Her time has come at last. May Irwin has downed the anti-fat inventors, and Marie Dressler has stepped in to jump upon their prostrate bodies. Miss Dressler is an artist who suggests May Irwin. She is a clever, magnetic woman, foaming with good nature and joviality, and "The Lady Slavey" has pushed her to the front, although "Madeleine; or, the Magic Kiss," gave her a good shove in that direction. Miss Dressler was unfortunate in "A Stag Party," but there were no life-savers out when that melancholy farce was wrecked, and all hands were lost.

Miss Dressler owns a large stock of that incomprehensible essence called magnetism. She compels the appreciation of her audience. She enjoys herself immensely, and that enjoyment is contagious, like laughter. The man who laughs heartily and persistently will convulse a whole audience and cause an epidemic. Miss Dressler has still a few things to learn, and she will learn them. She will put an extinguisher upon her self-consciousness and obliterate a few of her affectations. And then we shall like her even better.

Charles Danby, who is considered very funny in London, is not particularly edifying in New York. If his humor be dry—well, I prefer fun that is moist. Dan Daly has grown somewhat tiresome. His brand of mirth is monotonously tuneless, and he inspires you with the wish that you had never seen him before, so that you could indulge in a first-time appreciation of his efforts. Charles Dickson will confer a favor upon the community by explaining exactly how he knocked the barnacles from his voice. It was thickly encrusted when he sang a few weeks ago, but in "The Lady Slavey" it is not at all unpleasant. The acid of necessity is, of course, a great dissolver. Mr. Dickson probably felt that relentless Fate called upon him to sing, and so he made the effort—successfully.

The humor of George Dance, who wrote "The Lady Slavey," reminds one of W. S. Gilbert's rhyme in "His Excellency." He says:

In search of quip and quiddity I've sat all day alone—apart—
And all that I could hit on, as a problem, was —to find
Analogy between a scrag of mutton, and a Bony-part,
Which offers slight employment to the speculative mind.

For you cannot call it very good, however great your charity—
It's not the sort of humor that is greeted with a shout—
And I've come to the conclusion that the muse of jocularity
In present Anno Domini is worked completely out.
It certainly looks very much that way.

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Edward Vroom declares that he wants to "elevate the stage." That remark was once attributed to Mrs. Potter, who began her work by reciting "Ostler Joe" in Washington. A great many people want to elevate the stage. Whenever times are dull, and one or two failures have darkened the horizon, somebody arises, girds up his loins, and says "I want to elevate the stage." It is a mania, harmless and amusing. The power generally used to elevate the stage is not hydraulic. It begins with an h, and is known as humbug.

So far the stage has strenuously resisted all these elevators, and I rather fancy that Mr. Edward Vroom is actuated by a desire not so much to elevate the stage as to elevate Mr. Edward Vroom, and perchance Mrs. Edward Vroom. If there are any little Edward Vrooms I will also include them.

Mr. Vroom will on Tuesday night make a big production at Palmer's Theatre of Francois Coppee's romantic drama, "For the Crown." I hear that it is really a beautiful literary effort, and my object is not to throw cold water upon it, for it such excellent people as Rose Coghlan, Maud Harrison, Charles Craig and John A. Lane.

That is all very well. There is no fault to find with such procedure. When, however, it comes to such arrant, hypocritical nonsense as talking about the time being "ripe for such a movement," as though a remarkable epoch were about to stalk in upon us, I protest. Let this young Vroom be honest, and admit that he has tried starring, and has endeavored to obtain a foothold on the stage for several years, and that this last effort with "For the Crown" is merely another attempt in the same direction. All this fol-de-rol about an important movement is sickening. When Mr. A. M. Palmer, Mr. Augustin Daly and Mr. Charles Frohman invest their hard-earned money in productions—without subscriptions and influential patrons—they do it in a straightforward and a manly way.

Mr. Frohman spent thousands of dollars to stage "Michael and His Lost Angel." a play that certainly had a keen literary value, and one that might have been boomed as an epoch-making work, and advertised with all sorts of humbug about art and independence. It was put on just as unpretentiously as though it had been "The Lady Slavey." It failed to please the gallery, and it was withdrawn. There was an end to it. Mr. Frohman lost his money, and bobbed up smiling with a new play.

Mr. Vroom, however, because he produces "For the Crown" by subscription is guilty of the humbug of trying to start a movement to elevate the stage New York is full of gudgeons. It is a veritable Gudgeonville. The small fish are simply waiting to be netted. They swallow the bait, and smile in their death agonies.

Mr. Vroom in his circulars declares that Elihu Root writes: "I am sure that M. Coppee will be gratified by the work of his interpreter, and by the reception the American public will give." Colonel William Jay writes: "I am of the opinion that the play which I heard you read would be an excellent one to open with." The Hon. Henry E. Howland writes: "The time is ripe for it, and I am confident that such an enterprise would meet with the greatest popular favor." Julien T. Davies writes: "I can assure you that it is a great pleasure to be connected even in a remote manner, with the production of such a play." Colonel William H. Bliss writes: "I believe your efforts will receive the grateful support of the public," and John A. Mitchell writes: "The present state of the drama renders your enterprise a boon to this community."

In fact, they all write, and Mr. Vroom prints 'em. As "For the Crown" happens to be published, and none of our managers have attempted to produce it, I can't understand why there should be all this hysterical palaver about it. There is a great outcry against the sordid motives of managers who are guilty of the heinous crime of trying to make money, but it must be remembered that they are catering for the public, and the public wants the stage as it is. And the stage, let me tell you, is doing very nicely, thanks for kind inquiries.

I am glad that M. Coppee's work is to be produced. When it was done in Paris, at the Odeon, it won golden opinions, and its author received the prize offered by the French Academy. But let us have it as an "attraction"—honestly, candidly, truthfully. Let us be able to go to Palmer's and say to ourselves, "Here's a young actor struggling for recognition, which we sincerely hope he will get, and which we will try to give him."

A fig for the elevation of the stage and all the humbug that it implies, when offered as a raison d'etre for a production made by a young man with energy, and a wife who knows how to "hustle," such talk is merely a mean subterfuge. Let us also remember that the influential gentlemen whom Mr. Vroom has secured as patrons will all be on hand Tuesday night. Their applause will mean little. The general public constitute the best judges.

"For the Crown" as a theatrical offering, pure and simple, has everything in its favor, and with Rose Coghlan in the cast it can scarcely fail to attract attention.

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John Hare is coming back to America next season. That is exceedingly good news. Mr. Hare has been a great success wherever he has played, and he is very much pleased about it. Nothing more satisfying and more worthy than his work in "A Pair of Spectacles" has been seen here for a long time. I don't believe that the man or woman exists who, after seeing this performance, could leave the theatre unhappy or discontented.

Mr. Hare's fate hung in the balance when he produced "The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith," a play as sickeningly illogical as "The Benefit of the Doubt." Failure stared him in the face, and all because he had succumbed to managerial suggestions. Mr. Hare wanted to open here with "A Pair of Spectacles," but he was told that the piece had been done to death. We had seen dear old Stoddart in it—and very admirable he was, too—and we had witnessed another version at the Fifth Avenue Theatre. Mr. Hare was tempted and he fell. The American craze for novelty was the elusive will o' the wisp, and against his own inclination he staged "The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith," and gave up his own stellar position to Miss Julia Nellson and Fred Terry, whom he engaged, it considerable expense, just for this production. As the Duke of St. Olpherts, Mr. Hare had very little to do, and we were all immensely disappointed.

Then came "A Pair of Spectacles," and Abbey's Theatre was packed to the doors at every performance. It is a credit to New York that this play succeeded. Its success should silence the pessimists who declare that the American stage needs elevating, and that it is in a highly demoralized condition.

The performance of "The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith" took a good deal of the financial gilt from the gingerbread for Mr. Hare, but it is nice to know that he has triumphed just the same. Hare is not a great actor, but he is a delightfully satisfactory one. He warms the cockles of your heart, and puts you on extremely good terms with yourself and with the world in general.

The news that he is coming back will please everybody. Hare hasn't an enemy in the world, I'm sorry to say. Perhaps his success will win a few for him. I sincerely hope so. The man who doesn't own an enemy or two is greatly to be pitied. He misses lots of fun.

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Brandon Thomas's play, called "Marriage," will probably be the next play at the Empire Theatre. It was produced about a year ago at the Court Theatre, London, and it is said to be a witty treatment of the divorce question. It is by no means as farcical as "Charley's Aunt," so it is to be hoped that it will not be quite as outrageously popular as that persistently screaming farce.

Brandon Thomas was assisted in his work by Charles Theeling. There will be no "heavy" production at the Empire this season, I understand that Mr. Frohman's policy is to produce several light plays, and nobody can blame him after the fate of "Michael and His Lost Angel."

"Marriage" will call for a very small cast, and they say that Henry Miller will not be in it, as after reading the leading role he discovered that it was a "character part" quit unsuited to him. Dodson—the John Hare of the Empire—will do it instead. At least, that is what they say. Mr. Miller has had a hard time of it with two such parts as Michael Faversham and Stephen D'Acosta. His discovery that there is a part in existence which he doesn't think that he could play has a certain charming novelty about it. As a general thing actors, in their own estimation, can play everything. Perhaps, after all, Mr. Miller is a really more artistic gentleman than people imagine.

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Mr. Fyles has made many alterations in his play, "The Governor of Kentucky," at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, and these alterations are all improvements. The piece is now going exceedingly well. Although Crane is absolutely unsuited to emotional work, which is as foreign to his nature as song-and-dance would be to Irving, he is such a favorite that, sooner than miss him, the public would, I believe, go to see him in "Hamlet." Mr. Fyles, as I said before, did an honest piece of work, and although it would have suited an emotional actor far better than it does Crane, still it must be agreeable to deal with a "popular" actor. I don't believe that Crane knows how "popular" he really is. He under-estimates his own value. The public is patronizing "The Governor of Kentucky" just to see Crane in a new style of part, and I believe that if he promises never to be a naughty boy again all will be forgiven.

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The difficulty of securing new plays is becoming more appalling every week. There is nothing new to be had for love or money. Plays are written—yes, they are written by the gross—but they are not the sort that managers care to present. At the Empire Theatre the scenarios and plots of one hundred and ninety-three unproduced plays stare the managers in the face. None of these plays will probably see the light of day, but their substance is kept on record for purposes of reference. Managers are unhappy. They don't know what to do. New York is irresponsive; London is as dull as ditch-water; Paris is dead-and-alive.

Bronson Howard, the hope of the American Dramatists' Club, came to grief with the new play that was to have opened the season at the Empire. Henry Arthur Jones's muse took a tumble with "Michael and His Lost Angel;" Pinero fell into the quagmire of despondency with "The Benefit of the Doubt;" Sydney Grundy, another hope, produced nothing more appetizing than "The Late Mr. Castello," and Sardou's inventive genius has given to Paris a revamped edition of "A Woman's Silence," which failed dismally in both New York and London.

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Don't imagine that managers are prejudiced hopelessly in favor of these well-known playwrights. They would purchase a play by Tom Jones or Bill Smith if it had any vestige of seeming merit. They read everything. They greedily seek for the nugget of popularity among the manuscripts submitted to them. They find darkness there and nothing more. It is a gloomy outlook, but this blight comes upon the theatrical world once in every six years. It is temporary, that is all. It is always difficult to realize that a temporary inflection is not a permanent one. The sun will shine again, and some new playwright will undoubtedly rise to bring grist to the managerial mill.

How fashions in plays change! Two years ago every Tottie Coughdrop who came from Europe announced that in addition to the inevitable Worth gowns she had secured a new play by Sardou. It was quite the thing to have a new play by Sardou lurking about your personality. Everybody gave him commissions

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